

Cherry Smyth in conversation with Emer Lyons in
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In conversation: Emer Lyons and Cherry Smyth

Cherry Smyth's latest collection is *Famished*. She's in conversation with poet, Emer Lyons.

Emer Lyons on March 30, 2020



Last year Irish poet Cherry Smyth released her poetic sequence Famished (Pindrop Press) exploring trauma, shame, and place. Famished is also a collaborative performance piece with composer Ed Bennett and vocalist Lauren Kinsella. I sent Cherry four questions, beginning with quotes from the book. From there, we went back and forth between New Zealand and London. —Emer Lyons

“How could air so light / carry a thing so heavy?”
The Westerlies, The Whole Island

EMER LYONS

How do bloodlines carry the heaviness of trauma?

When I gave up alcohol for two and a half years, this was something I thought about often. Alongside my own excessive relationship to alcohol, there is also a genetic familial and cultural trauma in many Irish people relating to alcohol because of colonisation. Intergenerational trauma in Ireland relates back to this colonisation, and the Famine, as both have created an insatiable hunger in us, a constant flux between excess and lack. This makes me think of a question from Garrett O'Connor's article “Recognising and Healing Malignant Shame”,

Could a similar process exist at the cultural level whereby prolonged political or governmental abuse of an entire population might be internalised as malignant shame by the institutions of society, and transmitted unwittingly to subsequent generations in the policies and conduct of government, church, school and family?

Could you speak back to this question, in regards shame, and the role of societal institutions, particularly in regards your research for Famished?

CHERRY SMYTH

I was at a St Brigid's Day celebration last night in the London Irish Centre and Emma Dabiri, reading from her book *Don't Touch my Hair*, made it plain how she suffered the brunt of institutional shame from nuns in a Dublin school in the 1980s. She was singled out for "special" treatment, often cruel and laced with white, missionary zeal, because her father was Nigerian and her mother white Irish. I grew up with the pride that Ireland gave more per capita towards world hunger than any other country, which was taken for famine empathy. In the course of my research, I learnt that it was also because Irish missionaries needed support for their work, not simply the starving peoples. Ireland, like Britain, has not fully examined its Christian colonialism and the legacy of racism that still exists. These are traumas of socially constructed, white exceptionalism not "bloodlines".

There seem to be three primary levels on which shame operates with regards to the Irish Famine: survivor's shame; subaltern shame (the shame attached to having been dehumanised) and the shamefulness of "bringing it all up again", whereby the speaker about shame becomes shamed and stigmatised, just as a whistle-blower who speaks of what most people know, is often ostracised. As Amy Martin suggests in *Women and the Great Hunger*, "Dehumanisation is central to the experience of famine" and it's disturbingly clear in the contemporaneous accounts and cartoons how the English portrayed the Irish as ape-like (monkeys in jester's suits, white chimps) in need of the civilising control of the superior race. There are also fascinating concurrences with epigenetics, shown in the research of Cathy Caruth, in relation to famine in post-WW2 Holland and trauma around 9/11, that pregnant mothers primed for extreme hardship, can pass on that

characteristic to their unborn infants. Some have suggested links to growing levels of obesity in Ireland today.

You mention alcoholism and it seems as if the person who tries to stem their own alcoholism is often ridiculed and humiliated for interrupting the consensus that the Irish are fun-loving people and what's the harm in having a drink? By exposing what is seriously wrong in a culture, what's been silenced, and to reveal this to others, can provoke disapproval and censure. The deep taboos around sexual abuse, abortion and queer sexuality have taken decades to shift, especially in Northern Ireland where colonialist damage continues to endure and divide.

EMER LYONS

There's also lyric shame, the shame associated with an author's self-insertion into their work. All these shames are so gendered. I was just thinking about this, and reading something about hysteria, and that all made me think, that this is what *Famished* is—an exposure. Historically exposure kept writers from their “home”, or place where they grew up, as if they were banished to live forever in the double time of abjection bringing, “together fascination and shame, the clean and the filthy, the sought-after and the banished” (Julia Kristeva). In this bringing together, is the author at risk of a constant liminal life as a mediator? But without self-insertion, or exposure, or performance, how else are we to mediate between the body and the text?

CHERRY SMYTH

My “I/eye” now, is much more a performance of an “I” than it was in earlier works. It is less exposed and/but more plural. It is strictly absent from the first two sections of the text and then enters through what is witnessed and ingested, carried through the descendant's body and allowed to open into

‘we’. When I perform on stage, I am always “I” even though I don’t speak as “I” and also “we” in the space created by the audience. An exposure without the lyric “I”? Perhaps “we” is gated by gender and I needed to pass through “I” to speak as and for “we”. I like what Jennifer K. Dick argues about the elasticity of the lyric in *Tears in the Fence*, bent out of shape by strategies in auto-fiction and modern technological identities. “One can see the experimental ‘I’ as being within the *experiential* open and opening out towards the otherness and place of the other within the ‘I’ itself.”

EMER LYONS

Living in New Zealand definitely makes me more aware of colonial shame, and how I can feel it from both sides. I went home (I still call Cork home) for a year and discovered my name had been taken off the electoral register. I remember this sense of relief of suddenly not feeling responsible for any country. Sometimes it is all consuming being Irish outside of Ireland, or in Ireland. That’s why I’m so focused on being queer, being a working-class dyke. Being Irish is this fact steeped in violence, and sometimes I could live without the expectation that comes with it, like an expectation of some form of knowing, and being in the world within which I am not sure I, or my poetry, fit.

How did you come to the page in *Famished*? How did you fit the content together? Did you aim to recreate a feeling of violence through form, through gaps, and spaces?

CHERRY SMYTH

I was inspired by the line gaps in Adrienne Rich’s work and more recently by the shape of the lyric essays and lists Claudia Rankine uses. “You can’t put the past behind you. It’s buried in you; it’s turned your flesh into its

own cupboard...” as Rankine puts it in *Citizen*. I wanted rupture in the lyric wholeness and also with the right-alignment of prose, a visual dissonance that makes the racism and voices of colonialist order othered. The *Irish Times* called it a ‘dossier’ and I like the sense of evidence that carries.

“You can only handle death and other deaths / when you’re not dying.”
The Coffin-Land, Ballyliffin

EMER LYONS

I felt there were three reoccurring characters in *Famished*—shovel(s), wind, and bone(s)—and that they voiced a distinct Irish lyrical poetics. Throughout I thought often of Seamus Heaney, and mostly “Digging”. These three characters permeate death, and enabled the collection to dig into the roots of the soil of the land devastated. Now, as we battle daily with ecological grief, I wonder if the land of Ireland has ever really recovered from that devastation, and what effect that has had. Do you view *Famished* as a collection of ecological poetry?

CHERRY SMYTH

Of course, Heaney’s early work like “Digging” gave me one of my first permissions to write and to claim the land in which I wrote fully through the Ulster vernacular. But, for me, the influence of poets like Paul Celan and Wislawa Szymborksa gave me a spare, direct style that is more broadly European than distinctly Irish. The unrelenting bleakness of Celan’s poem “There was Earth Inside Them” lies closer to my sensibility than Heaney in some ways.

I’ve always been attuned to the ruins in Ireland: the seen and unseen. The barren stretches of depleted bog in Donegal or the untilled ridges that undulate up many mountains in the west, alert the eye to precarious rural

living and deep loss. One West Cork woman explained that behind each person I saw in Beara there were seven ghosts. The pre-Famine population on that peninsula was 28,000 and now it's closer to 4,000. As the writing of *Famished* took me from the mid-nineteenth century towards the present day, I became increasingly aware of the links between climate breakdown and food insecurity, most apparent in the poem "The Diet, Letterkenny, 2017", but also the links between migration and climate catastrophe shadow the book. If you look at any soil closely enough, sooner or later you will know solastalgia. And unlike grief for a dead person, which will end, grief for our planet has no catharsis.

EMER LYONS

What do you believe is the purpose, if it has a purpose, of ecological poetics, if not to be some form of cathartic engagement with that very grief?

I see some responses to grief through the engagement in creative and critical writing with witches. Women adopting a pagan like attitude through witchcraft to allow a connection with the land, and Feminism. This seems like one way in which people are managing to confront their sense of detachment from the world through history.

Did you find some form of catharsis in the creation of *Famished*?

CHERRY SMYTH

I certainly look at ruins in Ireland differently. I used to imagine these were Famine ruins and some are, but most of those who died and left during and after the Famine lived in cabins or less than cabins: "scalpeens", a hole in the ground with just enough reeds to cover the head. There is little sign of

them. My words are their sign, I hope. It's more a sense of redress than catharsis.

"How were we to know that we'd give back all we'd salvaged with flesh itself, our bones?"
The Clachan, Doagh

EMER LYONS

We have had numerous conversations about the concept of home, and I chose the above quote from *Famished* in order to consider how much our sense of home or place is embodied, and how much of that sense of self finds its way into the flesh of our words on the page. This morning you sent me this quote from Richard Powers' *The Overstory*,

We need to stop being visitors here. We need to live where we live, to become indigenous again.

In response, I looked up the definition of indigenous, "originating or occurring naturally in a particular place," which made me ask are queer people ever "occurring naturally" in any place? Is that unnatural occurrence part of the power of queerness? *Famished* has a different sense of embodiment from your other poetry collections with are connected to a personal self/body, more than a historic self /body of history, did your queer body have a part to play in the process of its creation?

CHERRY SMYTH

I can't help think about what Derek Jarman once said: "Heterosexuality isn't normal, it's just common." Queer sexuality seems to be "naturally occurring", therefore indigenous to all cultures. But you and I have discussed the global indigeneity of being queer, experienced so strongly by you in the centre of Montreal and by me in New York City streets with the Irish Lesbian and Gay (as it was then) contingent on a Pride March.

Certainly addressing themes of queer desire in the queer body are central to my earlier poetry collections but belonging, the fear of being rendered “homeless”, and the historical context of sectarianism, mistrust of difference, have guided my need to write throughout my work. Being a witness to 9/11, even if merely on live TV, I was very aware of being white, western, non-Muslim and the work I needed to do in the subsequent poem “Human Image” to prevent a cycle of fear and hatred in myself. This was also a challenge after the 7/7 attacks in London very near where I live, where I inhabit history in a queer body and bring the understanding of terrorist and state violence from growing up in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. Perhaps withstanding the public shame of coming out to my family and the wider social circle in Ireland, made me more emotionally resilient to dare to speak of silenced Famine history.

EMER LYONS

I remember reading your poem “Maybe it was 1970”, in your first collection *When the Lights Go Up* and feeling so relieved at the lines, “I was in love with Shawn Logan,” and the repetition of “I wanted him.” I felt relief from the feelings I had of not being seen as lesbian enough (by other lesbians) because I have had relationships and love with men, or this obsession that people have with insisting that a heterosexual past equates to bisexuality. Both of which completely underestimate a person’s right to self-identity. It’s as if ‘lesbian’ is a harness and not a liberator.

How does this outsider perspective, the gaze of lesbian poets, operate differently when it comes to writing about heterosexuality, and desire for other women?

CHERRY SMYTH

Desire is very ghosted in this book behind the desperate need to survive. I wanted to include the poem “Queer Famine” but it didn’t sit well with the rest of the book. A bit like dancing naked at a wake: you may feel moved to do it, but it feels disrespectful. Maybe keening is a way of being naked in grief while remaining fully clothed. A woman said after the performance in Portstewart that Lauren’s voice went to places in her body that no sound had ever reached before.

“They made us underdogs, / then shot us if we barked.”
The Plot of Scarcity, Empire, Ongoing

EMER LYONS

Beyond the page, *Famished* is a performance. The cacophony of sound and voice between Lauren Kinsella, Ed Bennett, and you reverberates in the room during the performance, creating an atmosphere that holds the audience in silence. Throughout the text, there is a rage, which for me, attempts this undoing of the historical repression of rage in Irish people, as we are often depicted as wild “underdogs” in need of taming.

How did you come to the collaboration of sound? And how important was it to you to have an audience?

CHERRY SMYTH

I realised when I finished writing *Famished* that words on a page were not enough. They needed music. I had discovered that the singing, musical and oral cultures in Ireland were greatly impacted by the Famine, through the huge loss of life, emigration and paralysing grief, and so I wanted to speak to that absence through music and song. I was also cognisant of the immense loss of mourning itself through mass burials in unmarked graves

and years of exodus with no markers for those who died of fever at sea. The piece needed a live audience to invoke a space for mourning and some kind of collective public lament. I wanted to evoke the keening by women at Irish wakes as well as sounds of grieving that weren't and could never be ritualised or even heard. Not only did Lauren's guttural vocalisations present the lament that the dying had no energy to utter but they began to sound like the blight talking to itself. Her extraordinary wordless growling and retching delivered a harrowing soundscape for the poem and tapped into the fury that we all experienced through working with this material. Ed's electronic score provided the sonic contours for the text and the spaces after loud sea or wind sounds amplified the silence between the voices, creating a kind of hallowed stillness that I couldn't have established with my voice alone. It appears that sound can access and transform trauma more readily than image: if you see a photograph of a dead child is very different from hearing the howl of its mother. I needed to hear the howl.

EMER LYONS

Will you continue with project-based performance pieces? How does the future of poetry sound to you?

CHERRY SMYTH

I will keep developing sound-based projects. The future of poetry sounds like the dub-step in Jay Bernard's live performance of *Surge* and Caroline Bergvall's drum and drone lament in *Drift*; like the children's rap and recitals in the video work of Mikhail Karikis. The boundaries are more porous with text, performance, music, art and poetry and I welcome that.